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Place rootedness suggesting the loss and survival of historical public spaces

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Abstract

Place meaning was created by people throughout their gradual experience of the place. Some will have deep and meaningful while some are pale and meaningless. Place meaning has an intertwined relationship with place attachment, where both involve diverse and distinct physical properties and social attributes. This study aims to decode place rootedness as a salient dimension in the theory of place attachment. It seeks to search for a meaning of historical public space in two historical cities in Malaysia. Two historical public spaces with different fate and state are chosen as case study area. Seventy five residents were interviewed on their perceptual responses toward the survival of Padang Kota Lama and the loss of Padang Pahlawan. Results show that both groups discuss the sense of rootedness toward the public space in a very positive term. They evaluate its distinct characteristics in term of long engagement, historical events, and place for social interaction and important moment they had during childhood days. A persistent and deeply-felt concern expressed by all participants of Padang Pahlawan is their regret that it could not enjoyed and preserved as it should be. The finding from the survey also reveals that sense of rootedness is highly conceded with the sense of pride and fear of losing the historical public space which is developed through its high historical values and uniqueness. The study concludes that both public spaces constitute an important aspect of residents' place identity and belongingness, which enable them to simultaneously remain connected to it.

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1. Introduction

Broad changes and ultimate effect of mass development on urban form taken place in the 1960s and 1970s have extended greater respect to the research on the uniqueness of places, their history and continuity of local pattern and typologies. Awareness about the threat of globalization forces on local identity and regional diversity has been arising too. This kind of awareness has successfully directed to the introduction and formation of policies and charters on preserving historic urban areas and growing studies acknowledging and overcoming the urban change^{1,2,3}. At the same time, the rapid change on urban form and gradual loss of more open spaces in urban area have offered new insights in landscape and urban planning studies^{4,5}. These studies have resulted in a growing public support for preserving open spaces based on scarcity of open spaces in urban area. In expanding upon the preservation efforts and gaining cultural support, stakeholders, planners, and landscape architects awareness and supports are considered necessary.

In recent years, there has been a strong interest revealed in reading and assessing the historical-cultural characteristic of places. The study identifies preservation as fundamental for maintaining and nurturing social identity, both in the local and wider population⁶ witnessing how urban design studies evolve into a dominant platform for making places for people^{7,8,9,10}. This paper sets to discover the significance of multiple dimensions of place rootedness which underlies dimension in place attachment theory. Place rootedness here refers to a very strong and focused bond that in its essence means being completely at home-that is unreflectively secure and comfortable in a particular location. This study stresses the need for a more democratic and enriching environment. It contents that all parties involved in urban development should have the humility to learn from the past by respecting the surrounding context and their root. It seeks to understand the significance of historical public place amongst people. Preliminary studies on ten historic public places in Malaysian cities revealed that there were continued changes and demolition occurred which finally succumbed to the loss of its historic characters and special attributes.

2. Literature review

2.1. Local concern on the gradual loss of public space in historic city of Malaysia

The pressure for development and inability to preserve the urban heritage have taken their toll on the sustenance of public spaces of historical cities in Malaysia. In these circumstances, the public spaces in historical part of the city invariably result in changes and demolition of many public spaces in Kuala Lumpur^{11,12}. Even though there was considerable degree of awareness about the role of urban conservation with the growing popularity of 'cultural tourism' planning concept, the overzealous effort to promote urban heritage has been exploited over aspiring sensation for tourist attractions. Local practice has shown that how the handling of the monitoring mandate in accordance with the existing legal protections does not have the desired result in maintaining the public space of historical parts in many Malaysian cities^{13,14}. This can be seen from the list of historic areas in Malaysia that since the Act on Antiquity was enacted in 1976 till this day, only less than ten historical sites have been gazetted so far¹⁵. In such cases, economic priorities have become the main target in development while heritage conservation is generally seen as a privilege rather than necessity¹⁶.

The problem get worse by the failure in appreciating and maintaining the esplanade or locally known as *padang*, which is of historical and cultural significances in many Malaysian cities. Being an open space in the core area of many historical cities has made it a desirable space for tourism, commercial and structural development¹⁷. The *padang* and its surrounding physical properties are fundamental to urban characteristic and local society¹⁸. It is a huge green lawn in the middle of the local city centre which adds to the livability of neighbourhood and communities. It embodies the properties and attributes that make an area attractive as a place to live, work and visit. After the independence in 1957, the *padang* has continually been used as an essentially weekend retreat and recreation for public^{17,18}. However in the late 1990s, with the increasing pressure on scarce land and with the growing popularity of cultural tourism, many cities are taking advantage of this prospect by realizing the uniqueness of historical buildings and capitulating the *padang*. The transformations have witnessed how huge green lawns encircled with huge shady trees became sites of new buildings and parking zones. These have the accumulated effect

of changing up the area into almost fully paved area instead of green and natural look. This trend has continuously ensued.

This research argues that besides having adverse effect on identity of place, demolitions and changes of *padang* also influenced the way residents experienced, perceived and felt about it¹⁹. The statement in an article *Leave the Ipoh Padang Alone*²⁰ had confirmed on how changes and new development proposals made by city council had affected people's emotions and their daily life. In this article, the Ipoh residents through one of their representatives expressed their gratitude for having *padang* as their source of pride and heritage of the city. Another local scene on resident's response to changes in the physical setting of a public place is evident in an article '*My heart cried at Bandar Hilir*' published in Harakah—English Section²¹. The author grieves for the loss of Padang Pahlawan that used to be one of the prominent national landmarks, the ground of the first independence proclamation and the ground where he spent much of his childhood days, now it has been transformed into entertainment areas and international hypermarket.

2.2. Place meaning

The significance of places and how it affects people has been widely presented in the field of environmental psychology. Studies have progressed to place related meanings and the ways in which these meanings can be applied in various types of places. In this essence, 'meaning' is considered as second major element that comes after the emotional bond of people to a physical location²² showed how in 1996, Williams and Patterson's research reveal how environmental problems that occurred in a place have affected environmental meanings including inherent (aesthetic) meanings, instrumental (goal-directed) meanings, cultural (symbolic) meanings and individual (expressive) meanings. More recently, Brown and Raymond have acknowledged the dynamic relationship between place and people²³. They explain how system in place meaning develops in term of patterns underlying emotions, cognitive acts and the meaning itself. The research shows how people can essentially denote different kinds and level of meanings to a particular place, for example, a place as a centre of harmony, of peace, of home or even of threat and of sacredness.

In a study by Gustafson, he investigates of what makes places meaningful²⁴. People were asked to list places they considered important and described what these places meant to them. The research identifies the meaning of places mapped around and between three major poles of - self, others and environment which almost have similar definition to previously discussed three broad interrelated components on the phenomenology of place. These three poles of attributes were extended with another three underlying dimension specified as distinction, valuation, continuity and change. Distinction is defined as similarities and differences in comparison with other places associated with a positive or negative valuation of places. It is found that continuity and change introduce a temporal dimension, in which places may be regarded as processes where the reproduction of existing meanings as well as the creation of the new ones, at times appears as the outcome of individual or collective projects. Another research by Manzo explores the nature of people's emotional relationship to places in order to learn about the kinds of places that are meaningful for people, the role these places play in their lives, the process and the range of experiences by which they develop positive meaning and ambivalent feelings shaping people's relationship with their world²⁵. In this case, people avoid places that remind them of aspects they would rather forget or, that remind them of painful experiences.

2.3. Theory of place attachment

The literature reviews reveal that there are many subsets of perceptual dimensions in place attachment study. William and Vaske for instance, suggest that cognitive relationship can be systematically identified and measured using a two dimensional scale of place attachment based on place identity and place dependence²⁶. However, Hammit, et al. expand the dimension with another three senses as place belongingness, place familiarity and place rootedness²⁷. Toward this delimitation, the research fall back in considering the public space as the main subject. Hence, the researcher decides to focus with the work of Green⁴¹ to become the central literature in this study (Fig. 1).

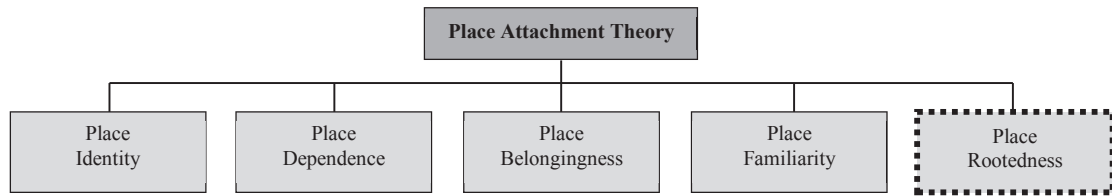


Fig. 1. Theory of place attachment for public space⁴¹.

2.4. Place rootedness

In its essence, place rootedness means being completely at home, a feeling of unreflectively secure and comfortable in a particular location²⁸. It is a situation where people have grown accustomed to their surroundings where they do not see the need to seek for other options. Hummon characterizes this situation as “everyday rootedness”²⁹ while McAndrew describes it as “homeness”³⁰. Place rootedness is described by Tuan as a psychological state of being a mood, or a feeling resulted from long habitation at one locality³¹. He characterizes place rootedness as a very strong and focused bond that in its essence means being completely at home—that is unreflectively secure and comfortable in a particular location. Similarly, according to McAndrew, people with strong place attachment are firmly rooted, less motivated to seek change, have greater feelings of privacy and control in their homes, and are more satisfied with their place of residence. Rootedness is also described as “a place is not a place until people have been born in it, grown up in it, lived in it, known it, died in it”²⁸. This high level of bonding is indicated by an individual’s elevated sense of security in a place and by sense of possession over the place.

2.5. Historic cities in Malaysia

Soon after the completion of the basic infrastructures and administrative centre in many historical cities in Malaysia, there were growing demand for spaces for recreation and sporting activities such as horse racing, golf, cricket, and football pitches to supplement both open spaces. This in turn, led to formation of a series of public and open spaces within the city. Since the late 19th century there is a range of open spaces introduced by the British, each has its own characteristic. These characteristics are formed through the garden, the hill, the lake, the garden, the park, and the *padang*. These open spaces acted as a ‘microcosm’ of colonial society and as their political, military, social and recreational hub^{31,32,33}. Their establishments were on sites which function as centre of administration, commerce and European settlement. Penang, Taiping and Kuala Lumpur are among the example of towns with comprehensive open spaces establishment. The establishment of open spaces in the colonial town in Malaysia was completed around 1930s.

3. Methodology

In an environmental experience research that is mainly discussed in environmental psychology, human geography, ethnography, sociology environmental, psychology, leisure studies and humanities studies, the focus found was on the formation of analytical framework for the understanding of what makes places meaningful^{24,34}. Similar studies also include investigation on the relation or bonds between local residents and their meaningful places and environments^{35,36,37} and review the theories, concepts and ideologies of people and place^{38,39,40}. The findings of such studies often demonstrate that it is important to consider the breadth of people’s affective and cognitive based attachment when exploring concepts and theories associated with people and place. In addition, other various definitions of concept (place attachment, place identity, place rootedness, etc) are reviewed and synthesized, and thus new frameworks are clarified. Sense of people rootedness that is forwarded to historic public place may come in the aspect of cognition and affection. In this study, seven variables identified as homeness, everyday rootedness, satisfaction, reflection, bond, privacy feeling, and control were measured to elicit the place

rootedness of urban residents on historical public spaces studied. Therefore, face-to-face interview approach is chosen due to the nature of place meanings and place attachment studies which habitually deal on the understanding of the ‘essence’ of place⁴⁰. This essence can be manifested as the emotional aspect of place attachment and symbolic dimensions, which are better captured in a personal interview setting, adding a depth and richness to understanding.

3.1. Criteria for site selection

The study therefore settled within two *padang* located in different historic cities in Malaysia: *Padang* Kota Lama in Georgetown, Penang and *Padang* Pahlawan in Bandar Melaka, Melaka. Both *padang* share common physical characteristics of city of Straits Settlement and are located in a city’s core area that represents a mature heritage place. Both cities still hold a widely acclaimed reputation as part of historical zone in which both are inscribed on UNESCO’s list of World Heritage Sites in July 2008. Each of these cities collectively shares and meets three of UNESCO’s six criteria in expressing their outstanding universal values:

- Representing exceptional examples of multi-cultural trading towns in East Asia and Southeast Asia
- Living testimony to the multi-cultural heritage and tradition of Asia and European colonial influences.
- Reflecting a mixture of influences, which have created a unique architecture, townscape and culture

3.2. Padang Kota Lama

Historic City of Georgetown covers 109.38 hectare site on the north-east of Penang Island. It is regarded as the core zone. Surrounding the core zone is a 150.04 hectare band called the buffer zone. Padang Kota Lama is located in the core zone, one of the oldest sections of George Town and is among the earliest part of town cleared for development. It is the important venue for the most Penang’s important events. It was the first area developed by the British together with Fort Cornwallis in 1786⁴². Padang Kota Lama can be regarded as the growth centres from which the town developed and expanded (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Views of Padang Kota Lama in Penang Island.

3.3. Padang Pahlawan

Padang Pahlawan was formerly known as Padang Bandar Hilir. It was named after a town in which it was located, Bandar Hilir (before the town name has been changed into Bandar Melaka). Padang Palawan was built after a quiet, unspectacular and moderately prosperous period and was actually situated on reclaimed land of the Melaka Straits (Fig. 3). During the British occupation, the *padang* was used for military drill beside increasingly functioned as a public recreational ground. Padang Pahlawan was a historical piece of land that is so meaningful to the nation because it was where Malaysian independence was proclaimed. Since then it was maintained as an open space to the public accommodating a place for local traders, a place of history and a place of culture of the locals. In 2004, Padang Pahlawan which was used to be the ground for the first proclamation of independence in 1957, was actively promoted and demolished for commercial and entertainment development. The upgrading and privatization projects

conducted on the *padang* by following the concept of European plaza and roof top garden have greatly accelerated the disappearance of the physical character of the former Padang Pahlawan⁴⁴. The loss of Padang Pahlawan over a hypermarket and entertainment ground is now a daunting history of Melaka and its residents (Fig. 4).



Fig. 3. Views of Padang Pahlawan throughout history (Source: National Archive)



Fig. 4. Views of Padang Pahlawan throughout history (Source: National Archive)

3.4. Interview

For this research, the assumption is guided by the methodological issue emerged from the above issues and assumptions. It deals with how one conceptualizes the entire research process. This research starts inductively in which the categories from informants are developed rather than specify them in advance. The description of the case and its setting are detailed out before revealing the more abstract themes. Initially, the research employs the layering techniques of analysis in order to produce numerous dimensions of place rootedness and followed by grouping these dimension into finer and more abstract categories⁴⁵. For example, in order to map the sense of rootedness elicited by residents, the researcher first details the individual statements of informants about experiences with the phenomenon before moving to the underlying dimensions between residents who are able to experience and enjoy the historic pubic place with the one who had lost it. A face-to-face interview was carried out randomly involving 30 residents of Padang Kota Lama (PKL) and 40 residents of Padang Pahlawan (PP). For PKL, 28 of participants were men and 2 were woman. The ages ranged from 21 to 84 years and the participants live in different parts of Penang. Another interview was carried out with 44 participants from PP with age ranging from 20 to 84 years old. Similar to participants of PKL, the residents generally live 1km to 40km away from Bandar Melaka. Even so, the existence of the historic public place is no longer accustomed to the residents despite the researcher's allegations regarding the development consent and relation to PP.

The goal of the interview analysis is to discover the emerging themes and variables suggesting place rootedness. From the audio record of each interview, researcher transcribes the responses for further analysis. This is followed by a systematic process which manually searches and arranges the interview transcripts and field notes to gain a deeper understanding of the narrative text and present the data in the understandable manner⁴⁶. In addition, the researcher listens to the interviews repeatedly to extract particular essence from the narrative. The analytical frameworks of Gustafson are used to analyse the textual data with describing expressions of meaning, and interpreting meanings within specific context under seven underlying variables as explained earlier²⁴.

4. Findings and discussions

Overall the residents express many different ways in which their relationship with *historic public places* impacted positively on the sense of rootedness. A 60 year old man reported his sense of rootedness to PKL in which he explained how the *public place* has a significant meaning and plays important roles to all walk of life. It made him feel good to see the *public place* which he had known for number of years to be perpetually maintained as a desirable place for recreation:

"They should preserve this place for our grandchildren; so that they can play, or come here to park their vehicles by the sea... we could see our kids. If the place is gone, I do not know where to take my kids and grandkids next. So please, I really hope they leave this place alone."

Further, 58 years old pharmacist who comes to PKL everyday expressed how he felt if he could not manage to go to PKL for a day in order to spend time as he usually does. He felt that it was not possible for him to be away from PKL as he felt sure he would get distressed:

"I will feel very uneasy. I want to relax myself...Every time I come here I can relax. I do not have other place to go...I am addicted to this area. There is no other place like this area. I like this place very much."

There was some evidences for how the childhood memories of the place provide sense of rootedness amongst residents. An elderly aged 60 explained that PKL evoked place memories and he also felt that part of him is gone if the public place is changed:

"It brought us back to our childhood memories, I used to play football there, and if it is all gone... It feels as though a part of us is gone with it"

Overall, the findings provide evidence for the long engagement and memorable experience especially during childhood days at the *padang* to maintain self-continuity. There was also evidence that it is used as memories to the person's past⁴⁷ as it evokes memories each time the person thinks and looks at the *place*. Places like this also can be used as an element to maintain positive self-esteem through association with its diverse role as a public space and distinct memories with someone's loved ones (Fig. 5). As the place provides self-continuity and self-esteem, there was evidence where it created loss, discontinuity and poignant feeling. One young lady, aged 25 expressed her feelings suggesting her rootedness toward PP where she also linked the *public place* with her late father and brother:

"Living in a city without Padang Pahlawan is like eating a doughnut without sugar. I think every residential area must have such open public place as it provides a space for any occasion or activity for everybody. The old Padang Pahlawan ...as it has marked many precious moments in my life especially with my late father and brother. As a real Melaka born and bred, I am very proud of the place because Independence was first declared there. I feel as if there is a big loss..."

The response by a lady in her 40s perhaps best capture how PP provides strong sense of rootedness. The lady replied earnestly when she was asked whether she still remembers about it

"I do, it is where I was born and bred. Ever since I was small I had seen it [about to cry]. If we were playing from my house, all we needed was to walk to reach here."

The importance of this public place to one's life is so clear, so is the desire and dream to be in the old place even for a while when the same participant replied in such an anguished voice when the researcher inquired whether she had ever felt that the place is part of her:

"Of course... I grew with it. Born here, I had fallen and gotten up here, plus I work here. It saddens me...I mean imagining our home town being taken away. It was hard for us to adjust with the changes. I really miss the way it used to be. I wish everything the way it was....even if it was for a short while."

A middle aged man, who works as a security guard in a nearby office, spent his time daily after work at PP and had very strong feelings about the importance of PP in history and its potential representing the image of Melaka. One of the most striking words indicates his rooted feeling is that the place is so important in which he associates it as a 'home':

"Looking back, this public place should not be disturbed. Because it holds a lot of history. Those who know their history come to Melaka asking about the padang. Where are we going to show them the whereabouts of it? Are we going to show this? This is not it. This is a shopping mall. This is where we have made our mistake, in wiping out the place... It is like our home. No matter how ugly it is, it still is our home. It has its history. They want to improve it, hence they have to remove the open space, and now it is gone. It was still

a piece of history even though it had changed.”

Both groups discussed the sense of rootedness toward respective public places in very positive terms. These are positive affection. Memory of past engagement and direct experience generate the affection. This suggests that positive affection is an attribute of rootedness. They evaluated distinct physical characteristics of the public place such as its openness, fresh air, huge green turf with long engagement, historic events, place for social interaction and important moment they had during childhood days. The results from the interview have reinforced the importance of the resident-public place interaction and have illustrated that past experience and the memories of those experiences also contribute to the development of place bonds, which generate sense of security and control as well as being at home. A persistent and deeply-felt concern expressed by all residents in PP is one of regret that the *padang* could not be enjoyed and preserved as it should be. Factors attributing to feeling of regret were identified as loss and change of environment and physical characters, discontinuity of experience and insecurity. However, the discussions of PP residents on placelessness are etched with depression, deep regret, sense of loss and powerlessness where they could not do anything to protect their beloved place. This is because their place has subsequently disappeared under the development of commercial and other various kinds. Even though the new change serves better facilities to the residents, the residents prefer the original characteristic of PP as they are normally regarded the *padang* as a social space serving the public for free. The finding suggests that *padang* belongs to the public. Thus any changes on it shall conform the public consensus.

The finding from the interview reveals that sense of rootedness is highly conceded with the sense of pride and fear of losing the *padang* developed through its high historical values and uniqueness. The respondents from PKL indicate the highest degree of feeling of fear for losing it and feeling of proud. It is evident that despite those strong feeling, both *padang* are less associated with the designation of deeper or symbolic meaning like “*eating a doughnut without sugar*”. In the case of PP, results from the interview indicate slightly lower sense of rootedness than PKL. However, similar cases are presented due to symbolic meaning in which the respondents disagree that both *padang* are comparable with other recreational area in both cities. The findings imply that place rootedness is characterized as a very strong and focused bond that in its essence brings more ‘holding a membership’ but rather an intense level of bonding.

The study argues that the majority of residents with strong sense of rootedness struggle with the challenge in coping with disruptions where they are perceived as still in the stage of ‘negotiating with the reconciliation’⁴⁸ between what they have enjoyed in the past and in the present. A statement by many residents, who supplicate for the old *padang* to be as it used to be, have directed to a strong sense of denial besides suggesting a deep sense of disruption upon changes that occur. As disruption does not peak immediately after relocation, ties to new environments are not easy replacements for what was left behind. For instance, family members certainly cannot be replaced and new friendships are not literally replacement for old friendship. This case is equivalent to the loss of a place they often visit. There were times when they felt it would have been part of their lives, the loss or its physical changes to some extent will change and affect their feeling and lives. Similarly, in this study, a place like PP work as a facilitator of emotional needs to its residents, which includes emotional meanings representing the bases of attachment to the home place where its loss would be certainly hard to be replaced (Fig. 5).

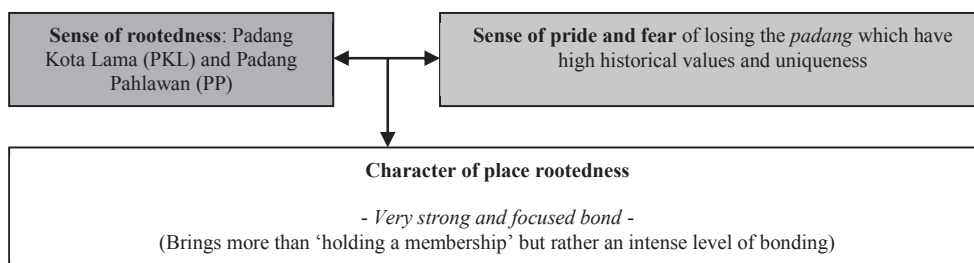


Fig. 5. Finding on the sense of rootedness for Padang Kota Lama (PKL) and Padang Pahlawan (PP).

5. Conclusions

The study on meaning reveals that the essence of both *padang* studied is generated from residents' daily experiences, sequence of important events, local culture, and distinct natural and built properties. Besides these aspects, the extraordinary meaning for *padang* lies on the symbol (analogy) featured from prominent history which relates to history of the state and city, country's independence, resident's childhood, and personal experiences. The importance of experiential relationships between people, properties and attributes that make the *padang* important public place emerges strongly from the study suggesting that experience influences understanding, perception and values of place resulting the construction of multiple meanings. To the residents, the *padang* are richly endowed with functional, social and cultural meanings. In addition, the study reveals that it is through sharing memories of their childhoods, knowledge, awareness and appreciation when people begin to construct deeper meaning and simultaneously associate it with deeper sense of attachment such as place belongingness, place identity and place rootedness. As such, it can be concluded that rootedness is represented through a deep understanding of physical properties, social interaction, historical and cultural representation in place. This fundamental continuum is essential to their use and continuation. Due to the fact that understanding the intimate relationship between residents is critical to social ecological balance, successful design and planning, this research therefore provides clear evidence how planning and design practices of new development on historical places can disrupt community's sense of place attachment and disturb expression of cultural identity for local. The function of long existed public spaces like *padang* is more than mere backdrop to acknowledge; the residents always have complex and intimate relationship with it⁷⁶. Its spaces, properties and attributes are instilled with highly personal meanings. They provide sense of attachment to residents and are vehicles for personal and community growth due to the bonding established between residents and their long interactions.

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